

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF SEXISM IN ONLINE GAMING COMMUNITIES: MAPPING CONTESTED DIGITAL TERRAIN

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An awareness is emerging of women's participation in online games and it's culture, however they may experience substantive challenges in laying claim to the 'gamer identity', within digital domains described as masculine, and sometimes hostile spaces by players, campaigners and activists. In public discourse, gaming is becoming increasingly synonymous with sexism; with media reporting harassment of female-identifying gamers as well as those who voice concern about these issues. The gendered dimension of these issues tends to be fiercely disputed and has competing understandings in online spaces. This study combined issue network analysis and grounded theory to produce a contextualised exploration of the ways in which sexism was understood in such communities. Analysis of multi-modal data revealed three categories which were strategic in framing this debate including; 1) potential (mis)recognition of such behaviours within these contexts, 2) mistaken emphasis upon the gendered dimension of identity within interactions, and 3) qualification to 'count' and be heard on these issues. Online spaces reproduce inequalities that exist offline and owing to the technological affordances and contextual nuances, are also sites of cultural production where relations of gendered power may be configured. The implications for transformation efforts to promote inclusive spaces are considered.

Keywords: online harassment, gender, video games, online citizenship, online communities

1. Introduction

Global growth in online gaming participation has seen the proliferation of communities associated with gameplay, gaming culture and events in online spaces (Veltri, Krasnova, Baumann, & Kalayamthanam, 2014). These communities are increasingly made up of players who could be described as 'non-traditional' gamers – players who do not fit within the primary

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consumer category of young men (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). It is argued that community inclusion is particularly difficult for this previously underrepresented group because gaming cultures have been historically underpinned by a deeply embedded androcentric gendered discourse. To this effect, Jensen and de Castell (2013) argue the challenge in the promotion of inclusive spaces is one of “inventing equity” (p.79). Discussion of “sexism” (and what constitutes it) in online gaming has been divisive with contested views on these issues within gaming communities (Fox & Tang, 2014) (e.g. see recent “#GamerGate” incidents, Wingfield, 2014). It is within this context that this study offers a contextualised and nuanced exploration of the ways sexism is negotiated in gaming communities and the contested meanings that frame them. “Sexism” is understood here to be an ideology of the derision of people based upon gender status manifested socio-structurally and through cultural institutional practice as well as beliefs, attitudes and actions of the individual (Swim & Hyers, 2009). This definition was selected to allow a sufficiently flexible and broad understanding of this concept in light of the aim of the study. Background information is provided to contextualise gaming activities, communities and culture alongside the existing understandings of sexism and gender-based harassment from research scholarship, media reports and activism. The methodological approach will be outlined and the analysis of data will be connected with pertinent theoretical and research scholarship. Analytical insights concerning the ways in which sexism is constructed and the resultant implications for female-identifying players as a non-dominant group in these communities will be presented. The article will conclude with recommendations to progress change-efforts in this domain.

1.1 Context of the Issues

“Gender” is understood to be primary organising category for power inequalities; the analysis of which is essential for addressing with consequent manifestations of gender-based disempowerment as well as sexist ideology and practice in communities (Angelique & Mulvey, 2012). Feminist-informed community psychology scholarship emphasises that engagement with gender “cannot be teased apart from other aspects of our identities or from the contexts of life experiences” (Angelique & Cully, 2003, p.191). Embedded within the development of feminist community psychology practice is an orientation towards contextual analysis and sophisticated conceptualisations of identity (Angelique & Mulvey, 2012; Bond & Mulvey, 2000; Mulvey, 1988). While gender may be the primary focus of the work, the intersecting dimensions of along which identity may be defined including ethnicity, sexuality and age, are too, implicated. Owing to the nuances and technological affordances of online environments these contextual elements merit substantive consideration in how they shape gendered relations of power in these communities, and consequently will be given special attention in this review of the literature.

In current practice, to work “with community” includes online communities, or those which use computer-mediated communication to interact in Internet spaces (Kloos et al., 2011). Similar to offline communities (constituted outside of the Internet and would meet in person), they often have (explicit or implicit) conditions for membership, practices and boundaries which are regulated (Kloos et al., 2011). It is possible that these may blend for example, in a local area network (LAN) party gaming groups may meet physical locations with the purpose of playing together online, however the focus of this paper will be on those online operation of communities

(such as gaming ‘clans’ who play together in real-time, from diverse geographical locations and are situated across websites).

Drawing upon emerging bodies of scholarship which investigate gender-based disempowerment and hostility online (e.g. proliferation of ‘E-bile’, Jane, 2014) the abovementioned parameters may be usefully connected with the idea of “(digital) citizenship” (e.g. see Henry & Powell, 2014 and Jane, 2016). As derived from Citron and Norton’s (2011) studies of technology-facilitated sexual violence, citizenship is understood to concern “users’ capability to partake freely in the internet’s diverse political, social, economic, and cultural opportunities, which informs and facilitates their civic engagement” (p. 1140). Engaging with this concept in gaming spaces offers a useful starting point for making sense of sexism, especially where online communities are not viewed as only a microcosm which replicates offline socio-structural arrangements and power inequalities but are sites of cultural proliferation where gender relations are too, produced.

1.2 Women’s Gaming Citizenship

While traditionally gaming has functioned as a pursuit requiring time investment and skill development, advances of social platforms and technological portability has diversified the gaming market; creating games that do not require the same dedication (Veltri et al. 2014) which broadens appeal and accessibility. These “casual games” are often associated with social network connectivity. The gaming industry has been successful in attracting these players across multiple gaming platforms (e.g. phones) and women are thought to make up a large proportion of casual gamers (Juul, 2010, Lewis & Griffiths, 2011). Women’s participation is not limited to casual games: women’s participation across diverse games and in online gaming spaces has become more apparent over time (Shi & Kirsch, 2013) with women thought to make up approximately 41% of gamers (which has slightly decreased in the last few years) (Entertainment Software Association, 2016, 2017). This represents an interesting shift away from the traditional young male consumer (Veltri et al., 2014). This, they say has led to a change in the dynamics within this community where distinguishing who belongs or is a “real” gamer has become important. For example, distinctions are made between “hardcore” gamers and casual gamers who play particular games (e.g –games such as “words with friends” on smartphones). Salter and Blodgett (2012) consider this shift in dynamics to be part of creating exclusionary and sometimes hostile environments for women gamers. In actuality the ‘casualness’ of the games (which has a contested definition) is less important than the strategic rhetorical function it serves. Recent critique posits that conflating women’s gameplay with the lesser regarded category of “casual gaming” functions to delegitimise women as “real gamers” and to dismiss their contribution to gaming communities (Vanderhoef, 2013).

An area that has received substantial discussion is the gender politics of the games themselves. It is argued that there is a reconstruction of sexist gender politics within games; in particular this critique has referred to the game design and content (Bertozzi, 2008; Taylor, 2003). This includes; the narrative, the way in which gender is represented and the gendering of characters, and the significance and placement of female characters in relation to the storyline. For example, particular critiques have been provided of the sexualisation of female characters which is often viewed to be indicative of the broader issues of women’s representation in the community, objectification and exclusion (Brehm, 2013; Taylor, 2003).

This has also, at times, been connected with the idea that this is a male-dominated industry where women only make up a small portion of the workforce of game developers and programmers (Fox & Tang 2014; Kafai, Heeter, Denner, & Sun, 2006). There is now an emphasis (especially in academic scholarship) to represent marginalized groups along a number of dimensions of identity (including gender, race and sexuality) in games (Shaw, 2011). Women's increased inclusion in gaming communities and culture can be seen in online spaces. This includes facilitation of moderated websites which seek to promote women's participation in "social gaming" that is games that are shared with others and that may involve direct competition and/ or cooperation to attain achievement (Fox & Tang, 2017). For example, the site "Pandora's Mighty Soldiers Clan" seeks to provide a competitive environment that promotes respect for women in tournaments. There have also been contributions to gaming culture produced primarily for female gaming audiences (i.e. 'Game Dames' podcast). Research has documented women's enjoyment of gaming and positive experiences in virtual gaming worlds (Royse, Lee, Undrahbuyan, Hopson, & Consalvo, 2007). Additionally, organisations and groups that support women in pursuing careers in gaming, development and related industries have been established (Jensen & de Castell, 2013). Unfortunately, these positive examples of participation are not representative of women's experiences in gaming more generally.

1.3 Gender-Based Harassment

Sexism in gaming is widely reported, and this would include a specific manifestation in the form of harassment on the basis of gender status which has been documented in the media and in scholarship (e.g. O' Leary, 2012). Harassment here is understood to be concerned with enacting unwanted behaviours (such as verbal, physical, text-based) that negatively impact upon a person and would include sexual remarks (Maass, Cadinu & Galdi, 2014; Pater, Moon, Mynatt, & Fiesler, 2016). This has led to a problematic public understanding of gaming culture, compounded by incidents where those voicing concern about such issues received backlash including threats (Sparrow, 2014). Media coverage and research efforts have tended to focus upon gender-based harassment in massively multiplayer online games (MMOG); massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPG), like "World of Warcraft"; and multiplayer first person shooter (FPS) games, like "Halo 3". These games enable large numbers of players from diverse geographical locations to connect and interact with the digital landscape and each other in real time. This type of gaming allows for players to communicate, traditionally through text or pre-designated commands but now through voice-chat with a headset, sometimes within teams or in competition with other individuals (Cole & Griffiths, 2007). Communities associated with these types of gaming environments are the focus of the current investigation.

Consistent with media reporting, a growing body of scholarship has identified the presence in gaming environments of what is known colloquially in online spaces as "flaming" - abuse, including sexually derogatory comments, directed at female players. For example, Kuznekoff and Rose (2012) found speaking with a female voice in 'Halo 3' elicited three times more negative comments than a male voice, regardless of performance. There are dedicated sites where players post harassing communication (audio, text and images) they have received, like "You play games? So, you are... fat, ugly or slutty" (<http://fatuglyorslutty.com/>). Post categories include "Stepford Mentality" and "Death threats". The "About" section of the site acknowledges this as a common occurrence and says "But instead of getting offended, we offer a method for

people to share these messages and laugh together”, thus facilitating an alternative means of engagement.

The technological affordances of the games offer possibilities for obscuring, expressing and concealing gender or sex identity. Indeed, concealment of gender has been identified as a common strategy for female-identifying players to avoid harassment. Brehm’s (2013) research of perceptions and experiences of sexism in World of Warcraft reported that participants let other players assume they were male and pretended they were unable to participate in voice chat due to an equipment fault. For many reasons there is often an assumed male identity outside of the game landscape unless otherwise specified (Evans & Janish, 2015). This assumption is irrespective of the identity or body of the player outside of the game. Thus the focus in this paper concerns the perceptions of gender and the issues that arise on this basis rather than the gender of the player outside of the gaming environment or ‘offline’.

1.4 Digital Context of the Communities

The digital and cultural context in which these problems occur shapes the way they are investigated (Jane, 2015). One event or issue is often discussed across multiple sites (e.g. “reddit” forums and “Twitter”) and there is variance in the moderation across these sites (Jensen & de Castell, 2013). In this environment the arguments quickly move beyond two opposing sides, or a linear back and forth, with few limits on who can become involved and when. Positions can be reframed through a “battle of the proxies”. There is also relative anonymity online if desired.

Communities are constructed through networks of connected online spaces, with a continuation of the ‘gamer identity’ across these spaces. For instance, a gamer is a gamer communicating in a relevant forum as much as playing an online game. However, with gaming communities assumptions concerning homogeneity, familiarity or consensus should be avoided with regard to these issues. This diversity can be seen in the multiple ways these issues have been engaged with from the establishment of women-only competitions (Salter & Blodgett, 2012), to calls for bystander intervention on sexism (Sorrell, 2011), and mass activism in social media (i.e. “#1reasonwhy” Twitter campaign) (Hamilton, 2012).

Distinctions are made between those who are part of gaming communities and those who are not. The latter, especially the media, are considered to have little understanding of community-specific issues. As one commentator put it, much of what has been reported is “by people who don’t play games, for people who don’t play games”; thus lacking a sufficiently contextualised understanding of the complexities of these issues. To examine how these issues are engaged with a multi-site and multi-format analysis is required. Therefore, the starting point of this study is: “How is sexism understood within the context of online gaming?”.

2. Methodology

Exploration of the above question was underpinned by constructivist grounded theory (GT) principles (c.f. Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), and employed a combination of issue network analysis and abbreviated grounded theory methods. (Charmaz, 2006, 2014; Shaw,

2013). GT is designed to explore and generate ideas and theory from data (“bottom up” approach) in areas where little understanding of the phenomena may currently exist (e.g. see Kean et al. 2017) and as such is particularly useful for the focus of the current study. In constructivist GT there is no objective truth to be revealed rather there are a diversity of understandings that participants bring (i.e. on what would constitute sexism) which are mediated through contextual social and cultural threads; attention to which is fundamental to understanding these accounts in online communities. Further the researcher is viewed as actively co-constructing such analysis through their involvement in the research process in this framework.

A consideration important in selecting the methodology was the utility of principles and practices to translate suitable for the dynamic and shifting terrain of online community spaces. The iterative process of data collection and analysis characteristic of GT was facilitated through using an issue network analysis. This specific approach has been used to effectively research similar environments and topics (e.g. management of “trolling” on Australian feminist blogging networks) and was selected to facilitate the exploratory approach required by the question, and for its adaptability and capability to adequately engage with diverse and potentially contrasting viewpoints in the data (Charmaz, 2006; Shaw, 2013).

2.1. Identifying and Collecting Data

To adhere to the scope and ethical parameters of the study the following criteria was applied for data selection, that discussion:

- referred to sexism and/or gender-based harassment directed towards female-identified players
- related to online gaming activities, communities or culture with a primary focus upon multiplayer games
- takes places in open, public online spaces

As the distinction between public and private realms can be less clear in online contexts (British Psychological Society, 2017; Markham & Buchanan, 2012) sites that would not qualify as public were determined by the measures proposed by Eysenbach and Till (2001). This included 1) sites where registration or subscription is needed to view the content, 2) communities with few members and 3) where users had a reasonable expectation of privacy consistent with the policies and rules of the online group. Ethics approval was obtained from the University’s Human Research Ethics Committee.

2.2. Identifying Networked Sites Data Collection

Network analysis software (‘IssueCrawler’) was used to identify networked gaming communities and the key sites where these issues have been/are discussed. Selection of the data commenced with the immersion of the researcher into in these publicly open online community environments and this provided multiple highly relevant sites, whose URLs were used as the starting point for the first network analysis. Fresh network analysis were launched as guided by

the emerging analysis (detailed below). This helped to focus the data exploration through identifying and mapping where issues are being discussed online. An example of one of the output maps is presented below that depicts the visual the connections between these sites (Figure 1).

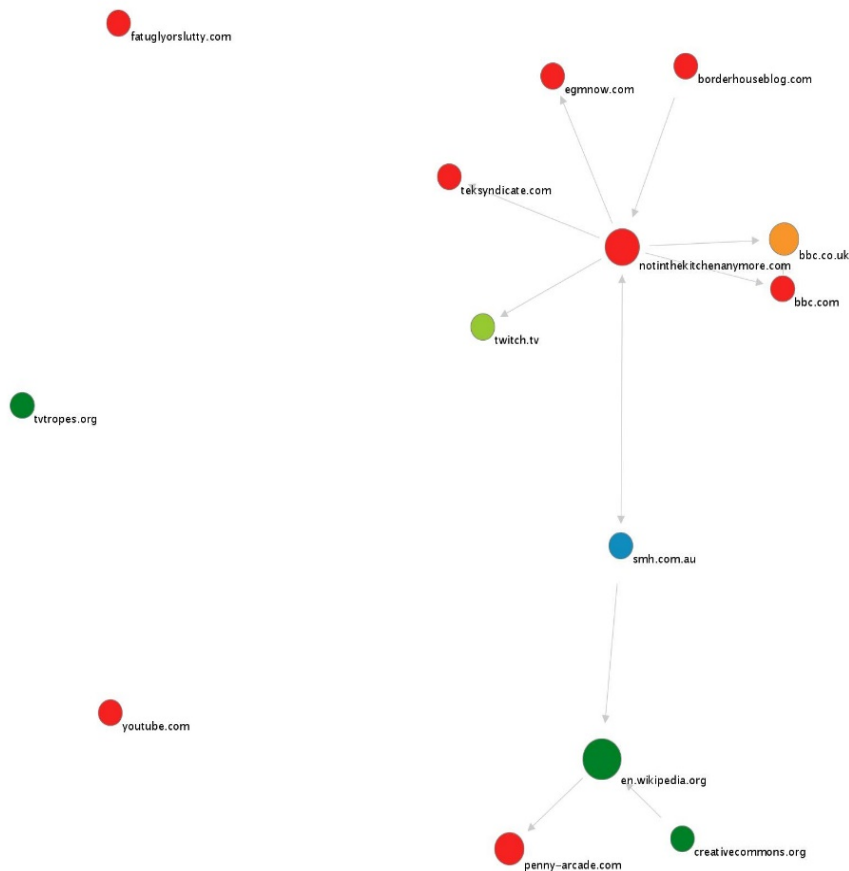


Figure 1. Sample output map

Collection and exploration of data took place over a six month timeframe (2014–2015). This included only English language sites which were predominantly US, UK and Australia-based but often sites were “global” in the sense that they could be accessed and may have region/country-specific orientations for a range of countries (e.g. data collected from the YouTube site). Common types of sites that data were collected from include blog posts and their comments and videos which examined relevant content (e.g. “Extra Credits” video series) and the subsequent comments responding to these, gaming community sites where issues emerged in discussion, and sites for gaming communities which were specifically designed and dedicated to engaging and addressing issues around sexism and gender such as “Not in the kitchen anymore”). This resulted in the collection of a multimodal data comprised of; individual pieces of text-based data

including texts from blogs, comments sections and discussion threads (n=26), but also podcasts (n=2) and videos (n=3) from which relevant excerpts were transcribed. A large quantity of individual pages were reviewed but in-depth reading, line by line coding, was reserved for pertinent individual texts ranging from a small section of text like a brief blog to entire threads over the course of the iterative collection and analysis.

2.3. *Data Analysis and Interpretation*

Coding of the data into categories was developed from a largely descriptive level, line by line, to increasingly analytical levels, increasing abstraction, as theoretical sensitivity grew. The abbreviated constructivist grounded theory method employed allowed for the simultaneity of developing the analysis and the deeper and further exploration of data including sourcing fresh data (launching new refined IssueCrawler network searchers) (Charmaz, 2006). Constant comparison of the elements within and between emerging categories facilitated this process and where necessary categories were subsumed, integrated and developed to better represent their contents. Through this process it became apparent that a substantive, related but distinguishable area developed concerning the possibilities for intelligible gendered subjects which was then studied separately (see Nic Giolla Easpaig & Humphrey, 2017). Theoretical sampling was aided by undertaking fresh network analyses to refine the data set in response to unfolding understandings and emerging research questions. Memo-writing was used to detail the developing analysis and to organise and bring coherence to the concepts, codes and categories as well as to form the basis of the written description of the findings (Charmaz, 2006, 2014).

3. Findings

Exploration of multimodal data opened up several lines of inquiry which were examined to reveal three key categories: potential (mis)recognition of sexist behaviours within social gaming contexts; mistaken emphasis upon the gendered dimension of identity within interactions; and qualification to ‘count’ and be heard on these issues. These are “contested sites” in which dominant and alternative meanings were debated.

3.1. *(Mis)recognising Behaviours*

Analysis revealed that sexism and gender-based harassment were conceptually constituted by a set of behaviours enacted in interactions between players in games in texts examined. It was argued that commonly acceptable behaviours enacted as part of gaming practices were being mistaken for gender-based harassment.

It was thought that the use of humour could be seen as offensive and sexist: which as one commentator highlighted interactions lacked “tone of voice”. Thus, it was considered that misunderstanding could be part of the problem; “sometimes the line between jokes and harassment can get blurry”.

Interactive practices such as ‘trash-talking’, insulting players and verbal aggression including ‘flaming’ were also regarded as acceptable and expected within specific gaming communities: “if you're going to subject yourself to such an environment, you should learn to bark back instead of crying on the internets”. Advice for addressing this concerned muting/blocking other players or being told “toughen up - taking offense from people you choose to associate with is at least partly your problem”.

In contrast, blaming harassment on a specific game or network was also described as “a cop-out” and contested this idea of reasonable expectations, for example:

I know exactly what I'm getting myself into when I game. I know there is a chance that I will be verbally flamed ... It's this attitude that I'm trying to change- that I'm asking for it, by being a woman who games.

These interactive behaviours are cultural practices deeply embedded within gaming contexts acknowledged as part of participation. The analysis invites us to consider the relationship between ‘volunteering’ to participate and what responsibility this entails. The idea of choice is implicated in where the burden of blame is “partly [the gamer’s] problem”. The ‘woman who games’ in this quotation attempts to challenge the notion that to openly game affirming a female identity is ‘asking for’ sexism and gender-based harassment. This implies that to be an active citizen in this environment comes with a responsibility to accept a pre-existing sexism or actively challenge it.

The grounded theory approach orients towards social processes, facilitating an exploration of what is achieved and how it is achieved in the text (Charmaz, 2006). Acknowledging that the sexism within online gaming communities exists within a wider sexism does not deny the presence of sexism and harassment that is specific to online gaming communities. Removing the demarcation of behaviour as “either/or” means a consideration of whether these behaviours are sexist and acceptable.

A helpful theoretical resource is Bourdieu’s scholarship on the workings of symbolic violence, particularly the exercise of “domination [that] is misrecognized as such and thereby recognized as legitimate” (Thompson, 1984, p. 59). This makes relations of domination appear to be part of the natural system of events (Bourdieu, 1998, 2001). This thinking is useful to highlight problems that arise in classifying gender-based harassment and normative behaviour as mutually exclusive categorisations. While a full Bourdieun analysis is beyond the scope of the paper, this enables a consideration that some of the practices, while normative, are emdded in a culture of sexism and may contribute to gender-based harassment. Classifications of behaviours may obscure rather than illuminate sexism in gaming.

3.2. Emphasising Gender

This category examines the salience of gender within these communities. Analysis revealed some acceptance of gender as a salient aspect within harassing interactions. For instance, “there's a special kind of trash talk reserved for female players” in gaming. However, this dimension was widely contested with two dominant strategies.

First, contention arose where gender was considered the primary dimension of importance, including prioritising gender over other dimensions of identity. In discussing sexism, it was

commonly raised that harassment and abuse impacted everyone; “the real problem is the level of abuse against *_everyone_* online”. There were further implications that the focus on women was not merited which was frequently quantified in discussions based on players’ experiences: “A lot of guys get verbally abused as much or more than many women”. In discussions, this was often used to counter the gendered dimension of harassment and it often minimised women’s reported experiences. This targeted multiple dimensions of identity and characteristics such as age, race and sexuality separately; “it’s not just something that happens to women. I’ve seen ageism and racism as well as the plethora of derogatory remarks regarding sexual orientation”. Further the pervasion of heterosexism, ageism and racism are reconfigured in a way that rhetorically separates these dimensions and obscures the salience. Also observed were attempts to detangle issues that had become conflated in this discussion by arguing the aforementioned positions are not necessarily mutually exclusive:

the point she is trying to make is not that women are the only ones who get crap online, but I think it is more that she trying to show what women get when they are openly and honestly women in multiplayer

Secondly, where gender was focused upon in discussion, this was frequently reframed as ‘special treatment’ at odds with equality. For example, “treating someone right sounds like a specific, one could say special, way of treating someone”. This idea conflicted with a sense of fairness and was framed very negatively:

You shouldn't treat them right. You should treat them just like you would treat anyone else. They don't deserve special treatment just because they're a different gender. And I suspect many of them wouldn't want to be treated differently just because they're female playing a game. And if they do, they can go piss off

This had negative connotations and was undesirable for players who thought this could apply to them; “I don’t want special treatment because I’m female”.

There are some assumptions in this discussion that contribute to issues becoming conflated, and attempts at clarifying this are evident, for example “i am not applying that treating women (or anyone for that sake) the right way means elevating them in any way but merely treating them with the kind courtesy a decent person would show to anybody”.

The various aspects of the analysis presented are drawn together in the contention of the identification of gender as a salient factor in harassment. The argument is framed within a dichotomy - harassment can only apply to women or to other people, therefore is not sexism, or that attending to gender means elevating women and promotes inequality. Such dichotomies restrict possibilities for engagement including limiting consideration of how gender intersects with multiple identity dimensions in the enactment of harassment.

3.3. Qualification to ‘Count’ and Be Heard

Through analysis it became apparent that being ‘real’, authentic, or having full membership of the community warranted the authority to speak on issues of sexism and gender-based harassment in gaming. Those positioned outside of the community were considered to lack

sufficient understanding of gaming, with specific reference to media reporting as misinformed; “I really hate articles like this who portray female gamers as just victims”.

An important process that became evident was the establishment of who the ‘real’ women in games were: those impacted that can speak of experiences with credibility in contrast to ‘fake’ female gamers. There was vigilance about this as one discussant suggested “Those ones are usually not gamers. They're trying to get attention, hence flaunting it. They think if they go to a male dominated place (online game for example) that they'll get lots of attention”. It was notably absent that the specific basis that gives one the authority to classify female gamers as “real” or “fake”, was not explicitly discussed and was seemingly assumed to be possessed by those on the discussion concerned with such distinctions.

There were a number of behaviours that identified ‘fake’ female gamers, including disqualification on the basis of the types of games played. One commented “you should not feel ashamed, hurt, or sad about playing indie games, mobile games, or whatever falls under this magical, non-existent category of fake games”. This linked with notions of casualness, investment, commitment required, and perceived difficulty. For female gamers the visibility of gendered status and the perceived conveyance of sexuality appeared problematic, as one commentator put it “Seems that a lot of girl gamers prefer to 'advertise' that they're girls by calling themselves 'FoxyBabe69' or whatever”. Another stated “The only girl gamers I dislike are the ones that flaunt the fact that they are a girl. If you just act normal and play, then I don't care”.

The concept of ‘fake’ and ‘real’ female gamers is widely known and often satirised. One purported “I confess it. I’m a fake gamer girl”. The use of humour here akin to the “Fat, Ugly or Slutty” page provides an awareness of sexism and alternative engagement.

Generally, credibility was established for female-identified players through performance within games; “Girls actually use teamwork and strategy, compared to equipping nubby load outs and pulling stat-whore tactics” as well as having played for a long time “a girl who has been gaming actively... since the age of five”.

The analysis yields insight into the relationship between understandings of sexism and harassment and female gamer identity in gaming community contexts. Notably participation is somewhat conditional because there are gender-specific addendums implicated in laying claim to being a ‘real’ gamer and being counted as a citizen.

4. Discussion

The analysis revealed ways gender-based harassment has been framed and debated within gaming community contexts and the barriers for the recognition of women as ‘legitimate’ gamers that delimit full gaming citizenship. Specifically, contention converged on: potential (mis)recognition of behaviours within social gaming contexts; mistaken emphasis upon the gendered dimension of identity within interactions; and qualification to ‘count’ and be heard on these issues. Determination of understanding of these issues occupies strategic importance in whether sexism and gender-based harassment was accepted as a problem. The interpretation introduces pressing concerns in which gender was obscured; invisibility and silence encouraged; and women’s participation conditional. Consistent with grounded theory, analytical

interpretations are now considered in relation to pertinent theoretical and research scholarship (Charmaz, 2006).

The “gamer identity” is said to have roots in a form of ‘geek masculinity’, which emphasised technological mastery (Taylor, 2012), and was initially forged in contrast with traditional versions of masculinity; thus occupying an ‘outsider’ status. Growth in participation, particularly of ‘non-traditional’ gamers, expands the boundaries of these communities and necessitates a rethinking of this original gamer identity (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). As Shaw (2011) points out the stereotypical identity dimensions of the “gamer” as being young, white, heterosexual and male are largely outdated. Non-traditional gamers challenge the exclusivity of this gamer identity to facilitate casual gamers, indie gamers and gamers of any gender, shifting beyond the origins of a ‘geek masculinity’. It is within these conditions that control of membership, and conditional citizenship has become increasingly important; especially in relation to female-identifying players (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). Further to existing research, this analysis illustrated specific conditions that were attached to women’s recognition as ‘real’ gamers including restrictions concerning expressions of sexuality.

Salter and Blodgett (2012) contend that members of groups marginalised due to their identity status, have tended to highlight issues such as exclusion and harassment leading to reprisal within these communities. Data in the study showed gender to be one of multiple dimensions of identity derogated which does not, as was suggested by some discussants in the texts, minimise the salience of the gender. However, it highlights the multiple and intersectional forms of identity and groups targeted for harassment. Drawing upon poststructural theory marginalisation converges at intersections of various identity categories and “difference” may be constituted as to privilege some as opposed to others (Butler, 1990, 2004; Crenshaw, 1991). Rather than detract from the significance of gendered disempowerment, this conceptualisation alerts us to the importance of examining privilege and power in intersecting forms of identity: in this case sexualities, race and age which were not addressed in this paper.

These findings contribute to the emerging study of technology-facilitated sexual violence (Citron & Norton, 2011; Henry & Powell, 2018). While researchers caution against seeking equivalence between offline and online harms, the harmful consequences for those who experience online violence are no less real (Henry & Powell, 2015). Indeed the ways in which the specific online contexts (including the technological apparatus) constitute and enable harassment is in great need of study (Henry & Powell, 2018). Problematic gendered relations have been documented in gameplay, game design and content and the gaming industry; (Bertozzi, 2008; Taylor, 2003), and this analysis illustrates how such relations shape how sexism and harassment may be understood and negotiated in gaming communities. Jensen and de Castell (2013) found that problematic gender relations are inscribed at multiple levels in gaming, including macro-cultural levels and the re-inscription of these in micro-level interactions. In exploring gaming-specific practices the reproduction of problematic concepts is identified in ‘loaded’ language such as “flaunting” or “advertising” gender or sexuality. The denotation of particular cultural tissues could be seen where discussion became reframed as a dichotomy which limited consideration of alternatives, and within which women were often positioned problematically. For example, appropriate treatment of woman gamers was reframed in terms of seeking privileged and special treatment and subsequently obscured interrogation of existing conditions. Discursively concepts such as preferential treatment or special privileges have been employed as rhetorical strategies against groups who have traditionally experienced disempowerment and exclusion (e.g. see Pedersen, Dudgeon, Watt, & Griffiths’s (2011) work on

the way in which the rhetoric of ‘special treatment’ is entrenched in the racism experienced by Indigenous Australians). Moreover, this problematic pattern also developed where the burden of responsibility was placed upon those subjected to harassment to avoid, minimise or manage this.

Engagement with social processes in grounded theory provides opportunity to consider the spaces and roles for women gamers made through these processes. Taylor, Jenson and de Castell (2009) state “the ways this emergent culture limits opportunities for female participation became increasingly apparent” (p.240). This is of concern because previous research highlights limitations in visible roles for women that were not obviously sexualised, supporting roles or whose expertise was assumed to be secondary to male players in commercial and recreational competitive gaming contexts (Beavis & Charles, 2007; Taylor et al., 2009). The analysis identified a myriad of problematic constructions of women gamers, including as vulnerable, requiring special consideration, seeking attention, flaunting gender, and unable to cope with normal trash-talking gaming practices. Women were valued for concealing or minimising gender and sexual expression, gameplay skills and commitment to gaming. Like other scholarship, this study fails to illustrate and engage with the construction of women’s desire, agency and enjoyment as players and cultural contributors (Taylor, 2003). In the context of gaming as a key site of cultural proliferation and commercial growth, the rewriting of these limited positionalities is needed to reflect complex and emerging subjective possibilities for women gamers.

5. Conclusion

The findings contribute to Jensen and de Castell’s (2013) call to move beyond description of these issues to “interrogate the way things are” (p. 80). Across the three categories of contention, debate concerns an ongoing battle for what constitutes normality within gaming community practice and its gatekeepers, with each of these forming crucial points of reference for how gender-based harassment is understood and engaged with. A united commitment from gaming stakeholders to address these issues could effect change. However, the diverse contexts of gaming communities may limit success. That said, within the conditions of an increasingly decentralised gaming ‘power base’ with prolific growth of networked autonomous communities based on diverse membership credentials as well as economic incentives for this industry; there is transformative opportunity for safe and inclusive spaces.

The following recommendations are made; firstly, the conflation of issues seen in the analysis highlights the need to develop richer understandings of gendered patterns of harassment and to consider how these intersect with dimensions of identity such as age, race and sexualities. Secondly, the processes through which women are considered ‘real’ gamers in the context of these issues merits a full and in-depth examination specifically concerning constraints and possibilities for participation. Analysis highlighted this as a mechanism through which female gamers are delegitimised or excluded entirely. Further consideration may help to reveal the ways in which this operates and to potentially contest this. Finally, change initiatives benefit from examining the diverse means of engaging with these issues that communities currently use with particular attention to the way in which communities negotiate norms and self-govern in digital spaces.

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